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ABSTRACT

In 1996, Cumberland County College (New Jersey) participated in the American Association of Community Colleges' Exploring America's Communities project, which works to strengthen the teaching and learning of American history, literature, and culture at U.S. community colleges. The primary goals of the college's action plan were: emphasizing greater pluralism, assigning writing on pluralism and American identity in the developmental writing courses, developing a course on 20th century American culture, and introducing an American Studies option. Two survey courses of American literature were revised to reflect pluralism and identity themes. Various poems, narratives, journals, orations, myths, and tales were read for the Colonial, Reason and Revolution, Romanticism, Realism, and the 20th century periods. In two U.S. history courses, the syllabi were revised and new materials purchased to incorporate more viewpoints. Students in developmental English classes had writing assignments on topics relating to pluralism and American identity. The major obstacle to the project was a lack of faculty interest, although students and some of the faculty were somewhat enthusiastic. Overall, participation in the project has allowed the college to improve and update the curriculum, encouraged students and staff to keep the themes in the forefront, and started the college with activities that will contribute to the Exploring America's Communities: In Quest of Common Ground conversation. (HAA)

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In: National Conference on American Pluralism and Identity Program Book
(New Orleans, LA, January 18-19, 1997)

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CUMBERLAND COUNTY COLLEGE PROGRESS REPORT--AACC

12/16/96

Cumberland County College is a small rural community college in Southern New Jersey. Cumberland County, with a population of 138,000, is the poorest county in a state where most of the wealth is in the North. The county has the highest unemployment rate along with the highest teenage pregnancy rate.

Enrollment in 1995-1996 was 2,500, including full- and part-time students. Half of the freshmen at Cumberland require remediation in math, English, and/or reading. Eighty percent of the students are the first in their families to attend college. During the 1995-1996 academic year, about one hundred students could be categorized as language minority students from among the 2,500 full- and part-time population. The majority of the full- and part-time students are women. The majority of minority students are African-American and Hispanic (predominantly of Puerto Rican origin); other groups represented include people from other parts of Latin America, Ukrainians (recent immigrants), and Native Americans.

Cumberland County College first opened its doors in 1966. It was the first of the New Jersey community colleges to open on its own campus. The area itself is lovely with easy access to Philadelphia (one hour), New York (two and a half to three hours), the shore (fifty minutes), and Washington (about three hours). Cumberland has an excellent reputation in the State of New Jersey, based primarily on tracking of students who have transferred from Cumberland to four-year colleges and who have done as well as or better than those students who began their education at the four-year college. The college recently opened a new Fine and Performing Arts Center, which has enhanced its reputation in the community and provided the opportunity for new programs and options relating to the fine and performing arts.

The primary goals of our action plan were several:

1. emphasize more pluralism in our U.S. History and our American Literature courses;

2. assign writing topics on pluralism and American identity in three Developmental Writing (EN 100) courses;

3. develop a new course in 20th century American culture
4. introduce an American Studies Option into the CCC curriculum.

Grant participant Sharon Kewish has revised her two American Literature courses to reflect the pluralism and identity themes.
EN 209 is a survey course of American literature from the colonial period through the nineteenth century (often ending with the Civil War--end of Romantic Movement). EN 210 is a survey course of American literature from the mid-nineteenth century--Age of Realism--through mid-twentieth century literature. Since the purpose of a survey course is to study those authors contributing the most significantly in the widest possible range, the focus in these courses is on the major authors of each period. In the last several years more women have been included in an attempt to compensate for their exclusion in the past.

Colonial Period:
Anne Bradstreet -- numerous poems
Mary Rowlandson -- A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson
Sarah Kemble Knight -- The Journal of Madam Knight, Literature of Reason and Revolution
Phillis Wheatley -- numerous poems
Hannah Webster Foster -- The Coquette, "Letters LXV - LXXIV" (the seduction, decline and death of Eliza Wharton).

During the period of Reason and Revolution, Ms. Kewish has included Native American voices, in actuality America's first immigrants.
Myths and Tales from the Seneca Indians, Cherokee Indians, Yakima Indians, Ogiala Indians
Poems from the Pima tribes, Orations from the Iroquois and the Shawnee

Age of Romanticism
Harriet Beecher Stowe -- Uncle Tom's Cabin
Louisa May Alcott -- Hospital Sketches

Age of Realism
Emily Dickinson -- numerous poems
Mary E. Wilkins Freeman -- "A New England Nun"

Sarah Orne Jewett -- "A White Heron"
Kate Chopin -- The Awakening
Charlotte Perkins Gilman -- "The Yellow Wallpaper"

This period also includes several African-American writers as well as works written about African Americans.
Charles Waddell Chestnutt, Joel Chandler Harris

20th Century Literature

Authors include Willa Cather, Gertrude Stein, Hilda Doolittle, Marianne Moore, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, Richard Wright, Edith Wharton, Lorraine Hansberry, and Gwendolyn Brooks. Ms Kewish is now working on the inclusion of additional Asian-American and Spanish-American writers. Since there is not enough time in each semester to discuss all of these writers, as many as possible are presented for discussion, some in more depth than others. The traditional American literature canon is greatly enhanced by these additional voices. Of the four major papers required in each American literature course, two may focus on these works.

Richard Curcio has incorporated more pluralism into his two United States History courses. He has purchased a lot of new material for the library which will contribute to the changes he has made in the syllabi. In addition, he has put together a new course in 20 century American culture, which will be taught for the first time during the spring 1997 semester as an honors course. See attachment for syllabus. Richard has also monitored a student retreat during which the themes of pluralism and identity have been discussed.

All the students in three of the developmental English classes (EN 100 03 (30 students), 04 (32 students), 06 (18 students) wrote a paragraph or an essay on a topic relating to pluralism or American identity. This was their final writing assignment before the College Basic Skills Test. We prepared for the assignment by doing lots of in-class brainstorming on possible topics--food, shopping for clothes and checking labels for where they were made, interviewing friends or co-workers from an ethnic background different than theirs, personal experiences, descriptions, and American identity. Most of them chose to write about what it means to be an American. Students love to talk about their backgrounds, and several of them were willing to share their papers with others. Some of the topics included Puerto Rican and Proud, My Guatemalan Grandmother, Interview with a Filipino Nurse, My Ethnic Heritage, Growing Up in Lebanon, What It Means to be a Turk; most students concentrated on what being American means to them and what we have in common. The ideas that kept coming up had to do with rights, equality, and

opportunities. Many mentioned that being multicultural made America what it is.

One of the major obstacles to the project is one we face frequently, and that is the lack of interest on the part of the faculty--faculty who bring a newspaper to faculty meetings or chat with their colleagues when a presenter is addressing the group, faculty who tell us they have enough to do without adding something else. We don't have a solution to this problem although it doesn't stop us and others from continuing to try.

The approval of the proposed American Studies Option remains to be done. The option will be presented to both the English/Humanities Division and the Curriculum Committee in February 1997. We do not foresee any problems with getting the option approved. The new Twentieth Century American Culture Course is already part of the spring 1997 schedule.

Students and a portion of our colleagues have been somewhat enthusiastic about the what it means to be an American topic. Some of their responses and comments are included in an attachment.

A highlight of the grant activities besides the initial conference, of course, was the campus visit of Carole Edmonds, our mentor. Besides encouraging the three of us involved in the grant, Carole gave a wonderful presentation to our faculty, our International Education/Cultural Diversity Committee, and Phi Theta Kappa. She gave us excellent ideas for incorporating pluralism and identity into the curriculum as well as the college community, including detailed information on implementing learning communities. As a result of discussions with Carole, we have already started a type of speakers series; Ms. Eva Salier, a Holocaust survivor, addressed Richard Curcio's class on December 9, and we are in the process of making arrangements with a Japanese-American woman who relocated to Cumberland County after spending some of the W.W.II years in a Japanese-American internment camp.

Overall, participation in this project has allowed us to improve and update the curriculum, encouraged us to keep the dual themes in the forefront for both students and staff, and got us started with additional activities that will contribute to the Exploring America's Communities: In Quest of Common Ground conversation.

A few ideas we gathered in answer to the question "What do we as Americans have in common?"

Answers from faculty at 10/96 faculty meeting: freedom of speech, other freedoms, language--some disputes on this, Bill of Rights, opportunities, travel, respect for people with different backgrounds, love of the land, pride, political system, public schools, ability to make a living, competition, wonderful feeling returning home after a trip to another country, books we read, movies we watch, type of restaurants we frequent, wiliingness to work together and help each other, volunteer and charitable activities, leisure activities, being American.

Answers from students in English 100 03, 04, & 06: food, pizza, Italian food, television, MTV, religion, cars, school system, freedom, pride, education, love of sports, fast-food restaurants, way we react towards each other, fun activities, equal opportunities, community colleges, rights, clothes/fashion, courts, people of all races and backgrounds.